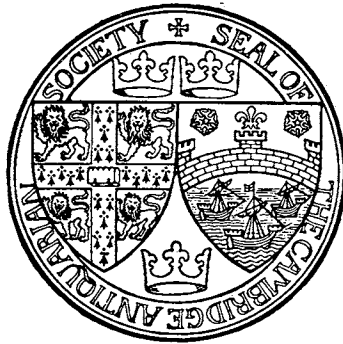


PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN
SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



VOLUME LXVII

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IMRAY LAURIE NORIE AND WILSON

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Published for the Cambridge Antiquarian Society (incorporating the Cambs and Hunts
Archaeological Society) by Imray Laurie Norie and Wilson Ltd,
Wych House, Saint Ives, Huntingdon

Printed in Great Britain at The Burlington Press, Foxton, Royston, Herts SG8 6SA

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“ROMAN BANK”: A MEDIEVAL SEA-WALL

I. A CULVERT BENEATH THE SEA BANK AT NEWTON, NEAR WISBECH

ALISON TAYLOR

THE Sea Bank is one of the most noteworthy archaeological monuments in the Fens, marking the seaward limit of land-reclamation during the Middle Ages. Originally it consisted of a continuous bank around much of the Wash, built of earth and clay, which William Dugdale in the seventeenth century claimed 'ought to be 50 feet in height (viz. from the first sloping thereof unto the crest) and in breadth at the top six feet'. It was built to protect the land between the villages and the apparently irredeemable salt-marshes from the high tides and sea-floods which, in 1251 for example, are known to have laid waste part of Leverington parish. In the southern fens it consolidated the piecemeal enclosure of fields for cultivation that had been encouraged by continual land-hunger up to the fourteenth century. Although the marshes on the seaward side gradually silted as the sea receded and were used for many purposes including salt-making and grazing cattle, they were not improved and divided up until the Bedford Level Act of 1663.

The Bank, which was first referred to as the 'Roman Bank' by Sir William Dugdale in his seventeenth-century 'History of Embanking and Draining', (without there being any evidence for such a date) has been levelled along much of its length, but in places, such as the stretch between Wisbech and Leverington, it is visible as a three metre high bank between the modern fields. Elsewhere the modern roads run along the top of it, for example between Newton and Leverington and along part of the Wisbech to Long Sutton road, near Four Gotes.

The section of the Sea Bank near Thulborn's Poultry Farm where the culvert was excavated (TF 442136) lies partly under the road and partly along the west side of the road. This western half stood about two metres above the road until a few years ago when it was lowered to the road level. Then in March 1976 it was lowered again to the level of the silt to the west, to accommodate an extension of a cold storage unit.

While this levelling was being carried out, the owner noticed some wood preserved in the blue clay beneath the bank; so with the co-operation of Wisbech Museum an excavation was organised, which revealed a culvert beneath the Sea Bank running from the landward to the seaward side.

The section exposed was about ten metres long and was obviously continuing for some distance beneath the road. It consisted of three massive trunks,

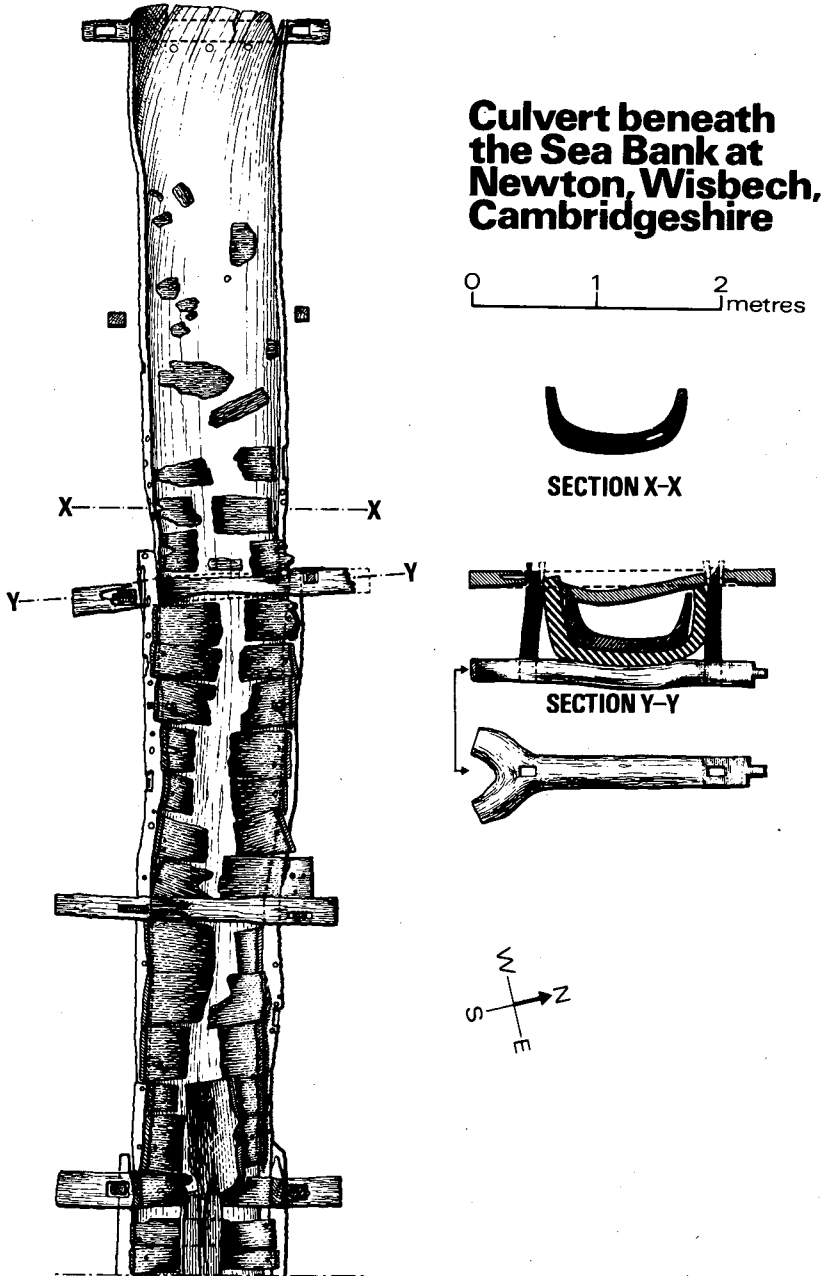


Fig. 1. Medieval culvert.
(Drawn by J. Christiansen)

probably elm, about one metre in diameter, that had been hollowed out and shaped slightly so as to interlock with each other (Fig. 1). They were laid on sleeper beams to prevent them sinking into the clay and these sleeper beams were tied by upright posts to strong beams across the top of the structure so that there was also lateral support. Planks had been laid to provide a complete cover, being pegged into position with wooden dowels. These had collapsed beneath the weight of the bank when slightly rotten and fallen inwards. The function of the stakes and spare planks at the eastern end was not determined, nor was that of the holes at the western end, though these possibly held some sort of gate. The carpentry involved in the culvert was evidently quite sophisticated and the whole structure was strongly and accurately made with elaborate joints. One of the trunks had evidently started to split before it had been lowered into position and so had to be mended with a wooden wedge (Section X-X), a repair so successful that it was not detected until this section was cut in order to take the radiocarbon sample.

The state of preservation was very good at the eastern end, but the waterlogging was not so complete beneath the tail of the bank at the western end, and the timbers had deteriorated progressively. The whole structure sloped about 30cm. in 10 metres towards the sea.

This is apparently the first culvert found beneath the Bank, but it seems likely that there was a series of them which drained excess water from the Fens; they were probably fitted with simple, hand-operated sluice gates, an example of which is preserved in the Wisbech Museum, which could be closed when the waters rose outside.

A section of the wood was taken for radiocarbon dating by the Sub-Department of Quaternary Research, Cambridge University. The date given is A.D. 1250 ± 40 years, which fits in well with the national pattern of land reclamation during the thirteenth century and suggests that its construction might have been a reaction to the flooding known to have occurred in 1251 in this area.

One of the sections of the culvert was taken to the North Level Drainage Museum at Parson Drove to be dried out slowly, and small sections are being kept in polythene wrappings, but otherwise conservation of the timbers has not been attempted.

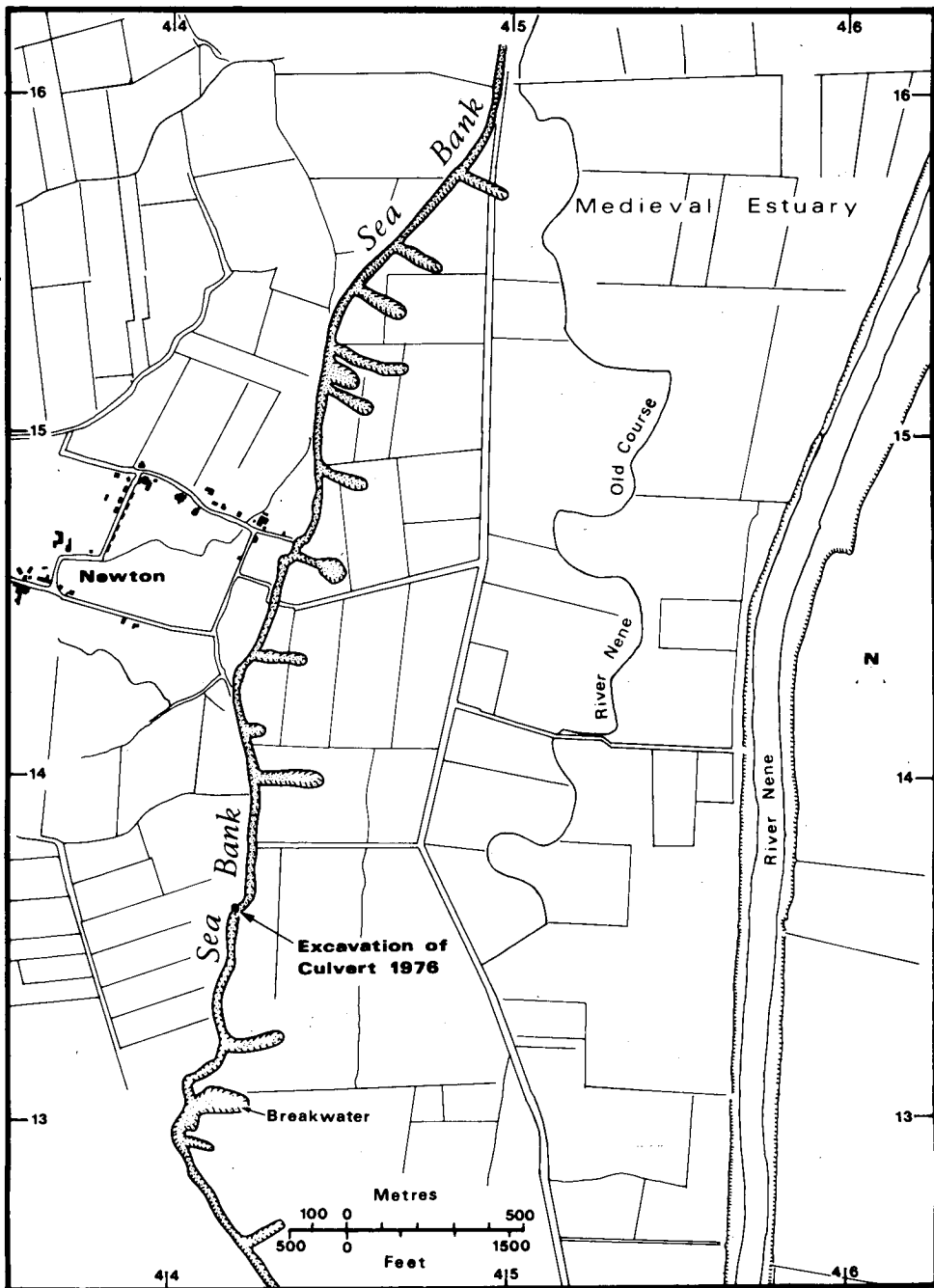


Fig. 2. The Sea Bank with breakwaters at Newton in the Isle.
(Drawn by B. Burk)

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Price £2 net for members, £3 for non-members

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